

Vietcong Navigator Directed Truce Copter, U.S. Aides Told

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By SYLVAN FOX APR 12 1973

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 11—An American source today reported being told by survivors of the incident that the truce supervision helicopter that was shot down by the Communists on Saturday was precisely on course and was flying "under the direction" of a Vietcong navigator.

The Vietcong have asserted that the helicopter "met with an accident" because it strayed far off its prescribed course.

A second truce-supervision helicopter flying a short distance behind the first was hit by small-arms fire but managed to land safely.

The survivors quoted were aboard this second helicopter. They also reportedly told officials here that they had signed a document falsifying their position at the time of the incident because they feared that if they refused they would not be released by the Vietcong.

Four representatives of the International Commission of Control and Supervision, three crewmen and two Vietcong officers—including the navigator, according to this latest account—were killed when the first helicopter was struck by a heat-seeking missile while on a peace-keeping mission over Communist territory.

According to the Viet Cong version of the incident, the helicopters were at least 15 miles south of their prescribed course at the time one of them crashed.

The helicopters were flying from Gio Linh, in northeastern Quang Tri Province, to Lao Bao, on the Laotian border. The Viet Cong say the aircraft were supposed to follow a course in a two-and-a-half-mile-wide corridor that followed Route 9.

The version of the incident provided by the American sources here today quoted the American pilot and co-pilot of the surviving helicopter as saying they were "firm" on their position at the time of the shooting.

"They said they were flying under the direction of a P.R.G. navigator," the source said, referring to the Provisional Revolutionary Government. "They said they had followed the prescribed flight plan exactly, following Route 9 at 3,000 feet" at 80 to 85 miles an hour.

The source said the two surviving pilots reported that before the flight the Vietcong had warned them about a new road being built near Khe Sanh, where Route 9 takes a sharp bend to the southwest.

The pilots were reported to have said that the Vietcong cautioned them not to follow the new road and that if they

became confused at this point, they were to circle the area until the navigator got his bearings.

However, the pilots were reported to have said that they had no difficulty maintaining their prescribed course beyond the bend in Route 9 and continued to follow the highway in such a way as to permit the Viet Cong navigator, who was sitting on the left side of the forward helicopter, to keep Route 9 in view.

About 10 minutes from their destination, according to this account, the occupants of the rear helicopter heard heavy-caliber machine-gun fire and saw puffs of smoke coming from behind them.

About a minute later, according to the account, the pilot of the rear helicopter saw the missile hit, followed by an explosion and fireball.

The forward helicopter crashed and the rear helicopter, although hit by small-arms fire, managed to land, the source said.

Two U. S. Victims Named

WASHINGTON, April 11 (UPI)—Disclosure was made today of the identity of two Americans killed Saturday when the helicopter they were flying for the International Commission of Control and Supervision was downed by the Vietcong.

A spokesman for Air America, a charter airline used by the commission, identified them as Capt. Charles Leroy Osterman of Fountain Valley, Calif., and First Officer Terry Dean Clark of Palmdale, Calif. Both were employed by the airline.

Mekong Clashes Increase

SAIGON, April 11 (UPI)—Fighting intensified in the Mekong Delta southwest of Saigon today with a series of heavy Communist attacks on South Vietnamese positions.

At the same time the Vietcong charged that the South Vietnamese artillery was pounding Communist forces west of Saigon in violation of the cease-fire.

In neighboring Cambodia a huge convoy rolled up Route 4 with vital supplies for isolated Phnom Penh. It was the first land convoy in 20 days to break through the Communist blockade.

In the Mekong Delta fighting, the Saigon command said that Communist forces had penetrated a hamlet near Kien Hung, 120 miles southwest of Saigon, but were driven back by local militiamen. It said six of the defenders were killed and one wounded, and that two Communist soldiers died.